

Love and Serve God

Winter Quarter: Our Love For God

Unit 1: God Is Worthy of Our Love

Sunday school lesson for the week of December 9, 2018

By Helen and Rev. Sam Rogers

Lesson Scripture: Joshua 24

As last week's lesson focused on Moses' final words to his people before his death and their entrance into Canaan, so this week we listen to what Joshua said to the Israelites before his death, after they had conquered and were living in the Promised Land. In law, there is nothing more sacred than a will. A will is a binding legal document. In this instance, the people will have the opportunity to ratify the will of the aged Joshua as he passes from the scene.

Joshua had been through it all, from the Exodus to the entrance into the land of Canaan – the land of God's promise to Abraham. The second dimension of that promise was also fulfilled: progeny. There were now 12 tribes, and each had settled into their allotted territory. The representatives of all these had been called by Joshua to assemble at Shechem.

Joshua had been designated by Moses as leader and had proven over many years of violent conquest his superior abilities to guide this people into the future. Remember, the first time we meet Joshua he is a leader in battle! (Exodus 17: 8-13) He was one of the 12 spies sent into Canaan before the conquest. With Caleb, he had reported, "we can do it!" Tragically their voices were not heard, and the Israelites were destined to spend another generation in the Wilderness until all who had seen the miraculous hand of God in the Exodus, at Sinai, and the feeding of quail, manna, and water from the rock had perished.

To this new generation, Joshua now speaks at Shechem. The location is significant. It is the first place named in Canaan when Abraham arrived. Many centuries later, tragically, Shechem will be the place where the nation divided North (10 tribes) and South (2 tribes) after the death of Solomon.

On this day all the leaders – tribal, political, religious, judicial, and military – had gathered. The purpose of the assembly was primarily spiritual, because the One truly in charge is the Lord God.

As Moses had spoken east of the Jordan, now Joshua speaks in the west. Both relate the "word of the Lord." Significantly, the scripture specifies "all the people." The message is for the entire nation, not just its leaders!

He reminds them of their history, beginning with Abraham and his journey, a spiritual journey as well as a geographical one. He and his family traveled from Ur to Canaan – in distance many miles and a magnificent leap of faith. Their forbears had worshipped many gods in the land

beyond the Euphrates, and, even in the Promised Land, this temptation would return again and again to resume this polytheistic practice.

The covenant faith of Abraham is stated clearly in verse 3, with the fulfillment of the promise. The following verses 4-12 tell the story of God's actions on behalf of these descendants of Abraham down to this momentous moment at Shechem. Please note how the nature of God is emphasized in the use of action verbs: *took, sent, led, gave, and delivered*. How important is it for a people to know their history, and to see God's hand at work? We too must tell the story – all of it – the good and the bad!

At this point God gives the people a poignant reminder: they cannot rest on accomplishments they had not achieved, but received. "So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant."

Our God is gracious and giving, who always provides what is needed – not wanted! Our response? Joshua states it clearly – *"Now fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord."* (vs. 14)

Sadly, we can always find other priorities that become for us god-like. The culture and form they take may be different, but the results are always the same – we fear and serve other gods.

As a good debater, Joshua has stated his argument, and documented his reasons with the facts of history. He leaves the decision with his hearers. "CHOOSE!!"

Every person must choose for himself. The choice makes all the difference! For you Harry Potter fans, remember how often in the tale Harry is told his choices made him different from Voldemort. The choices we make determine our character – not parentage, nationality, race, education, economics, gender, nor any other factor beyond our control. Sam had an old teacher who always said: "God votes for us; the Evil One votes against us; and we cast the deciding vote!"

Again, Joshua makes it clear where he stands. Regardless of how the people vote, Joshua and his family stand with the Lord. Martin Luther later would declare in the Reformation: *"Here I stand; I can do no other; God help me."*

When the clamor around us is overwhelming and one-sided, we must choose between what is right and what is easy. Joshua and Jesus, whose names come from the same Hebrew word meaning "to save," are both pioneers of faith, leading the people toward the "Promised Land."

We often remember Sammy Clark's holy geography: Egypt – the land of bondage; the Red Sea – deliverance through the water; the Wilderness wanderings; and crossing the Jordan – entering the Promised Land. We are slaves to sin, we are saved by baptism into the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus; we live in the wilderness of this world, and “on Jordan’s stormy banks (we) stand and cast a wistful eye to Canaan’s fair and happy land where (our) possessions lie.” In death we cross the Jordan into the Promised Land.

Joshua gives the people two options: serve the Lord or other gods. Both Moses and Jesus spoke in similar ways about our choices, and the consequences of them.

With a resounding voice the people declare: “*We will serve the Lord.*” As with any will, witnesses are needed, and Joshua tells the people they are their own witnesses. His final word to them was: “*yield your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel.*”

Again, the people said: “*We will serve the Lord our God and obey him.*”

This was the third affirmation of faith in this chapter, but we know the rest of the story.

Although the Book of Joshua ends hopefully, the next book, Judges, ends with a very different tone: “In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.” (Judges 21:25)

Translating our profession of faith into actions that are consistent with what we believe is where belief becomes a trusting faith. It was difficult then and still is today.

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